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CHAPTER VI

HUMAN SOCIETY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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WRITING in the thirteenth century A.D. the Arab geographer Ibn Battuta was greatly impressed by the contrasts in ways of life and social organisation shown by various communities of the Middle East. In particular, he devoted special attention to the differences between nomadic peoples, known collectively by the Arabic term of Badawin (singular : *Bedu*), and settled cultivators, or *Hadhar*. Such contrasts are still as characteristic of the peoples of the Middle East now at the present day as they were in the time of Ibn Battuta, and in examining the problems of human relationships in the region, it is useful at the outset to outline some of the chief features of social organisation. Attention will first be given to two relatively small groups—nomads and townspeople : conditions amongst the Hadhar, who form the majority of the population of the Middle East, will be dealt with at more length in succeeding chapters.

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The Badawin.—The main feature of this group is of course regular movement in search of pasture for animals. For the greater part, this movement is from one district to another—i.e. true nomadism ; but in mountain regions different levels in the same district are occupied successively, and this is termed transhumance.[1] The Badawin of Arabia may be cited as true nomads whilst the Kurds of Anatolia and the western Zagros tend rather to practice transhumance.

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With rainfall, and therefore pasture, both scanty in amount and liable to much variation from one year to another, the nomads have found that experience provides the best means of survival. Thus to the oldest members of the group is given the task of making decisions which guide the activities of the entire community—accent is, so to speak, on age, not youth. Frequently too, in the face of sudden crisis —failure of wells, or attack by outsiders—rapid decision is called for, and one man alone rather than a group, is looked to as supreme leader—in warfare particularly more confidence is felt in a single man than in a committee. This type of social organisation, termed patriarchal, places the life of a community under the control of a chosen man, and

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[1] True nomadism is in effect, horizontal movement, transhumance is more a change in altitude.